

BIG RIVER MINE
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Firm's agreement to fix dike may curb river's lead pollution

ST LOUIS (AP) — Missouri officials say they expect an easing of lead pollution in the Big River Basin because of an agreement by the St Joseph Minerals Co to repair a ruptured dike.

Company officials last week announced their decision to go ahead with the \$250,000 repair as part of a good neighbor policy. St Joseph Minerals operated a lead mine at the site of the dam for decades before selling the property in 1972.

Heavy rains broke the dam four years ago, allowing thousands of yards of lead-contaminated tailings from the mine to wash down stream for as far as 30 miles.

Biologists from the state Department of Conservation last summer found fish in the Big River so tainted with lead that a warning was issued against eating sucker fish from the river.

The repairs to the dike will plug several leaks and stop the flow of tailings into the river, said James Whitely, water quality supervisor for the Conservation Department.

But Whitely said he does not know how long it will be before the river is purified.

There is no practical way to get the tailings out — they'll be slowly swept downstream and dispersed over a number of years, he said.

The level of lead contamination

was found to vary widely among the species. Bottom fish contained up to 30 times the normal amount of lead, and other species such as bluegill and bass didn't contain abnormal levels.

An elevated amount of lead in the blood is a well-documented human health risk, particularly for children. Tiny amounts of lead in the body can cause physical and nervous disorders, mental retardation and even death.

In addition to the lead contamination, officials say there is a danger the sandlike material from the tailings will disrupt the river's fragile ecosystem.

Some species are deprived of their food source when the tailings cover up the river bottom, and that creates a snowball effect on organisms higher in the food chain, officials said.

Gary Welch, a spokesman for St Joseph Minerals, said the company first offered to fix the dam last October. The final agreement to make the repairs was delayed because the company was concerned that it could be assuming liability at the site.

Welch said he knew of no other areas in the state where the same type of problem with the mine tailings could occur.

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